

### **Chance Meets Choice on the Path to Autonomy: Psychology at the University of Minho, Portugal**

**By Óscar F. Gonçalves**

As Albert Bandura once pointed out, “in a chance encounter the separate chains of events have their own causal determinants, but their intersection occurs fortuitously rather than through deliberate plan” (1982). The history of the new School of Psychology at the University of Minho is a good illustration of how one chance encounter leads into another, progressively drawing a path in a long journey towards autonomy.

Back in 1986, I was graduating from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst under the stimulating advisorship of Allen Ivey. As I recently recounted (see Santiago-Rivera, 2009), Allen and I would meet frequently for breakfast to discuss my dissertation, the book he was working on — *Developmental Therapy*, philosophy of science, and world and faculty politics. After graduating from UMass, I got a promising faculty position in the counseling psychology program at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The late 1980s were an exciting time to be in Santa Barbara as a young cognitive behavioral therapist. Michael Mahoney was on the faculty, and he was attracting visiting scholars from all over the world (Gonçalves & Machado, 2006). My life was on a predictable pattern of academic achievement, but was interrupted when I was drafted into the Portuguese army. (Because I was not a U.S. resident, I could not get a waiver. For the first time in my career, the dice seemed to be against me.)

During my basic training as a military psychologist, I was invited by the University of Minho, in the north of Portugal, to join their faculty with the specific duty of designing a new psychology training program from scratch. At that time, Portuguese psychology was in what I refer to as an “academic phase,” characterized by the integration of mainstream psychology into Faculties of Psychology and Educational Sciences in what were, at that time, the three major Portuguese universities (Porto, Coimbra, Lisbon; Gonçalves & Almeida, 1995). This phase represented a remarkable development from a previous pre-academic era in which the only training of psychologist available was done in a private institute in Lisbon (Higher Institute of Applied Psychology) that, despite its efforts on behalf of psychology as a science and as a profession, was not recognized as part of the mainstream academia.

In order to understand the relatively recent development of psychology in the Portuguese academy, it may be helpful to remember that, between 1926 and 1974, Portugal was under a fascist dictatorship that didn't allow the development of either undergraduate or graduate studies in psychology in public universities (Gonçalves, 1990). When university studies of psychology were officially created in 1976, they were integrated into with educational sciences. This integration influenced the development of most of the academic psychology programs in the new universities, including the University of Minho.

In the fall of 1989, I began my new position as an Assistant Professor within a very small group of psychologists involved in training teachers and educators. We were not even big enough to justify becoming a separate department in the School of Education. My core assignment was to design a 5-year training program in psychology\* and to put together a strategic plan for the development of psychology at the University of Minho. I had no teaching load and no students — just the charge to draw up a program from scratch, something that I would hardly have had a chance to accomplish back in the States.

After a few months the faculty was able to agree on the following ambitious steps for the development of psychology at our university:

- Launching a new psychology training program at the University of Minho.
- Starting a systematic faculty search to find PhDs who were recently graduated or working abroad. Contrary to the French speaking tradition of the majority of psychology departments, we'd be aiming for faculty trained in Anglo-Saxon academic environments.
- Creating a Department of Psychology (still within the School of Education) with its own lab resources and training clinic.  
Launching PhD studies.
- Founding a new and autonomous School of Psychology.

The first objective — starting the program — was accomplished in less than a year, and we immediately started the process of attracting the new faculty. The rapid increase of faculty members and qualifications allowed us to claim our own Department within the School of Education, with its own labs, research center and training clinic.

The launching of PhD studies was a natural consequence of faculty and research development policy.

In few years, we were in our way to becoming a top Portuguese psychological training and research program. Psychology was still housed in the School of Education, but it became increasingly evident that education and psychology were strange bedfellows with very different academic cultures. The orthogonal nature of those fields became even more obvious when the Psychology Department started to push the idea that basic science research should be at the core of all the scientific and professional training of psychologists. Even most of the educational psychologists were developing projects in closer proximity with other natural and social science than with education itself. Moreover, most of the Psychology faculty training, research and outreach projects were carried out with other schools, such as the natural sciences, medicine, engineering, and social sciences. Psychology at the University of Minho was, indeed, fulfilling its role as a “hub science” (Cacioppo, 2008). But being housed in Education was preventing psychology from fully accomplishing its hub science mission.

Recognizing the dual nature of its components, the School of Education adopted a new designation — the School of Education and Psychology. But it was too late. Changing the name didn't change the game! Almost 20 years after drawing up our strategic developmental plan, it was time to move into our final objective — a new and autonomous School of Psychology. The timing was ideal. In 2008, all Portuguese public universities were required by a new law to establish an updated organizational structures and bylaws.

Again, chance found me heading the new department, with the privilege of leading an enthusiastic group of psychologist into this endeavor.

Three principals were the foundation of the new School of Psychology:

- Identity — Psychology is a science with its own object, methods and knowledge base.
- Autonomy — Given the specificities of its identity, psychology benefits from autonomy in managing its training and research projects.
- Polyvalence — Only an autonomous project allows psychology to fulfill its central role as a flexible hub platform (incoming and outgoing) among different scientific disciplines.

In the spring of 2008, a historical faculty vote unanimously approved a constitution for our own School of Psychology. Two months later, the general assembly of the university in charge of establishing the university bylaws approved the School of Psychology as a new organic structure of the University of Minho.

Twenty years after launching our initial project we were starting “Year 0” of the new School of Psychology. This time, however, we didn't need to start from scratch. We could build on what was already a top training and research program in Portuguese psychology.

Currently, the School of Psychology houses five-year integrated Masters programs (3 years Bachelors plus 2 years Masters) in seven different areas (clinical; health; sports and exercise; school and educational; justice; organizational, work, and human resources; and experimental and its application) and three year PhD programs in nine domains (clinical; health; sports and exercise; school; vocational; justice; organizational, work, and human resources; social; and cognitive science and experimental).

All faculty research projects are integrated in the Center for Research in Psychology. Recognizing that research is inseparable from education, we have been encouraging the development of research projects in all areas relevant for the training of psychologists in the different specialties in order to assure the link between training and research. Additionally, we have been favoring the cross-fertilization between different specialties in psychology in order to provide unity and continuity among diverse research themes and methodologies. Finally, we have been promoting collaboration with different research labs, both within and between scientific areas to benefit from scientific and technological advancements in other areas and to increase the relevance of psychological research.

The Psychology Research Center incorporates four research domains: basic research, health research, education research, and society research. In order to carry out all the research projects within each research area and under each research domain, the School has six research labs, which are cross-sectional resources for all research domains. The labs are: Neuropsychophysiology, Animal Learning and Behavior, Experimental, Psychological Assessment, Visualization and Perception, and Clinical Research.

The new School of Psychology benefits from a true international and multicultural environment, helping to unify the diversity of psychological science into one single school. The 36 faculty members completed their studies in diverse countries (e.g., USA, UK, Germany, Spain), and the 710 students (include hundreds of PhD students) from Europe, Africa, and South America. Additionally, the school has the continuous presence of visiting faculty from the world's top universities.

Life is, indeed, a complex networking of chance encounters. If it wasn't for my army draft 20 years ago, I would never have had the opportunity for the enriching experience I'm sharing with you today. But of course in the context of chance there is still room for choice, planning, and deliberation. We had the chance but we also made the appropriate choices. ♦

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\* In Portugal, psychologists are trained at the Masters level (i.e., 3 years Bachelors, then 2 years Masters).



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